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Our Free Press, as Always, Measures Up to Emergency

IN ANSWER to some murmurs in Washington that the United States' free press is partly to blame for the Cuban fiasco, the best answer is that the press has handled itself well in the face of many difficulties.

There is not an ethical newspaper publisher or editor in the land, we believe, who is not ready to recognize that any war, cold or hot, presents new problems and responsibilities. And the present record is one of notable help to the government on matters of security.

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President Kennedy certainly has not said anything to indicate that he would like the power of the press to be limited. Nevertheless, he pointed out in his speech to the nation's publishers last night that it is hard for us to move in secret while Russia can plan and act because of absolute control over the press and other news media. This indeed is a problem that needs more thought.

As for the abortive Castro invasion, if such an undermanned attack by Cuban exiles deserves such a name, it might have been better for all if the press had been able to give more advance information. For Castro's agents in Florida knew of the guerrilla training under CIA auspices, and Fidel himself, it develops, had some cause to predict an invasion.

When the little invasion did start, the press did not get much information from the State Department or elsewhere, at first. Later Secretary of State Rusk announced

that this was in no sense a major military movement, but news from Cuba said the very opposite. And in any circumstances, the Communists could be expected to blame the whole thing on an "imperialist" plot backed by the United States.

Florida newspapers are said to have voluntarily withheld news about the invasion preparations, which was their privilege; but we fail to see what was gained by this action.

Dismissing any thought of compulsory restrictions which would certainly be rejected by Congress as a violation of the Constitution, a meeting of minds on voluntary censorship should be attainable.

Great Britain has an official secret act, making it a felony to publish government secrets. But during World War II the United States had a better program of voluntary censorship. Reporters were expected to consult the Office of Censorship headed by Byron Price, himself a newsman, on stories that might affect national security. The results were more than satisfactory.

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Though printing all news that is proper and fit is the business of the press, it is not indifferent to the President's problems as a new program is launched for meeting enemy subversion and penetration.

Rights of the free press are not going to be tampered with, but patriotic cooperation in the cold war crisis can be taken for granted. If there are any who have doubts on this score, they have only to look around them.